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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates cross-generational communication between adolescents and adults, using various published references from the fields of communication, psychology, and human development. In the first two sections ("Adult-Adolescent Role Conflicts" and "Adult-Adolescent Power Struggles") the paper argues that confusion about role definition and power struggles contribute to relational problems between these two groups, and that establishing a supportive environment, and increasing self-awareness and self-acceptance are essential elements to improving interactions between the generations. In the third section ("Communication: A Means to Better Relationships") the paper finds that problems arising from role conflicts may be reduced by practicing self-disclosure, employing active listening skills, and paying attention to message wording; and that power struggle problems may be diminished through the use of conflict management skills, problem-solving skills, and decision-making skills. Twenty-seven references are attached. (SR)

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ADOLESCENT - ADULT COMMUNICATION:

A KEY TO CROSS - GENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT: "Adolescent-Adult Communication:
A Key to Cross-Generational Relationships"

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This essay investigates cross-generational communication between adolescents and adults, using various published references from the fields of communication, psychology, and human development. My argument is that confusion about role definitions and power struggles contributes to relational problems between these two groups. The perspectives and characteristics of conflicting roles are reviewed first, followed by issues involving power disputes. Finally, the paper shows how communication strategies and skills can assist in managing adult-adolescent interaction and thereby help improve relationships between these generations.

Communication between adolescents and adults is often filled with misunderstandings or heated conflict, and sometimes ends in violent outbursts or subdued standoffs. Each side is frequently left with unresolved anger or hurt feelings and a sense of exasperation that the other is simply "impossible". Adults knowingly exchange nods of understanding about having to deal with *"teenagers"*, while adolescents defiantly declare, "people over thirty cannot be trusted". Relationships between the two generations are often strained and difficult.

One factor contributing to these strained relationships is stereotyping. Devito defines stereotype as "a fixed impression of a group of people through which we then perceive specific individuals" (Devito, 1986, p. 305). Stereotypes, according to Devito, are usually negative. While the literal meaning of the term, "teenager", simply identifies a specific seven-year period of an individual's life span, it has come to mean much more than simply a designation of age. 'Teenager' is a stereotype which has come to connote a variety of attributes. Some of these might include the following descriptives: difficult, unreasonable, rebellious, susceptible to peer pressures, impressionable, irresponsible, inconsistent, moody, and driven by hormonal influences.

By using the term 'teenager' when referring to an adolescent, we begin to attribute the corresponding qualities of the stereotype to that person. Thus, the stereotype is perpetuated through the frequent use of the word in association with an individual. People come to expect the behaviors attributed to the stereotype. Thus, the stereotype itself helps to mold behavior, creating a self-fulfilled prophecy of expectation. When adults expect teenagers to exhibit the list of negative qualities which characterizes the stereotype, then those are the qualities which they observe (Fremon, 1968). Labels create stereotypes, which do not only generalize and describe, they actually cause and perpetuate behaviors. In this way, labels dehumanize and take away the uniqueness and worth of individuals.

The purpose of this essay is to explain the sources of communication problems between adults and adolescents. To achieve this goal, the essay will: (1) identify causes of role conflicts between adolescents and adults, (2) explain how power struggles between adolescents and adults can escalate conflict, and (3) show how communication skills can be used to manage intergenerational problems between adolescents and adults.

ADOLESCENT-ADULT ROLE CONFLICTS

ADOLESCENT ROLE CONFUSION

One source of communication problems between adolescents and adults is an inaccurate or unrealistic understanding of the adolescent role by both the adolescents and the adults with whom they interact. This confusion rises from factors concerning cognitive, physical, and psychological development, as well as cultural expectations and socialization.

Teenagers' cognitive development is often in conflict with their physical development and their psychological needs. While an adolescent's outward physical maturity may signal to the world that the youth is an adult, s/he may not be fully developed on a cognitive level. While the adult world may be expecting this mature-looking teen to act from an adult perspective, the adolescent may be incapable of doing so because of limitations in mental functioning. Piaget's theory of cognitive development states that humans potentially reach the highest possible level of cognitive capacity sometime during adolescence. However, it would be a mistake to assume that all youths are actually functioning at this level by the time they reach the late teens. Merely having the potential doesn't indicate that that potential is being fully utilized. Even if an adolescent has reached the highest cognitive stage (formal operational) and is operating from that level in some respects, s/he is very likely operating from lower levels in other situations (Dusek, 1987).

The adolescent's changing physical characteristics complicate the issue by forcing him/her to consider the question of social role as defined by gender in the midst of rapid and uncontrolable physiological changes (Glenn & Warner, 1972). Often the adolescent feels an inner conflict between childhood and adulthood. At one minute s/he may feel grown up, and the next minute like a child (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1989).

A youth's lack of social experience presents additional limitations to cognitive functioning. Cognitive development is not only a matter of capability or potential; experience affects development as well. Even if the adolescent has reached the highest stage in terms of *potential*, a lack of experience may prevent actual functioning from that cognitive level. Experience is equally important in terms of social development. Because of differences in experience, a youth's understanding of social relationships is different than that of adults. An adolescent who has never experienced certain situations cannot be expected to simply know what to do just because s/he has the cognitive capacity to understand. (Meacham, 1987).

An adolescent's communicative ability, indirectly tied to cognitive capacity, is another factor which affects adult-adolescent relationships. Ritter's (1979) study concluded that "adolescent egocentrism" limits a teen's ability to view another through the other's perspective. Thus, an adolescent's listener-adapted communication strategies may be less developed than those of adults. This egocentric perspective will very likely interfere in situations requiring empathic communication, contributing an additional stress to adult-adolescent interaction (Ritter, 1979).

Conflict between developmental tasks also contributes to the adolescent's confusion about roles. According to Erikson's theory of development, humans progress through a series of necessary "tasks" in addition to cognitive stages. These tasks, though they may be taken for granted by adults, or considered frivolous and unimportant, are *essential* to the development of self-concept and to the maturing process of human beings. During early adolescence, the primary task concerns

"identity formation" and focuses on affiliation versus alienation needs. This age group is concerned with issues of conformity and being a "part of the clan". In later adolescence, according to Erikson, the task expands into issues of "belonging" versus "alienation". At this point in time, the youth, having already begun to establish an identity, is beginning to see the ways in which s/he differs from others within the group. This task stage is more complex. Rather than conform, the adolescent begins to choose the group into which s/he fits, rather than trying to adapt him/herself to the group. Being newly formed, the adolescent's sense of identity is extremely fragile. (Meacham,1987).

During adolescence, the youth is establishing not only identity, but also emotional independence from parents and other adults who, until this time, have dominated his/her life (Peters, 1972). Glenn and Warner (1982) state that "the teenager, to experience normal development, must reject omnipresent parental advice in order to develop his own sense of separate identity". In other words, when adolescents "rebel", as parents might label the behavior, they are actually completing a necessary and healthy part of the maturing process.

With reference to Maslow's hierarchy, all humans seek to have their "needs" met. Adults often overlook the fact that youths actually have such needs, and thus, fail to give them credit for being *human*. In seeking to attain these needs, the adolescent is concerned with such issues as: peer relationships, questioning values and ethical beliefs, learning about socially responsible behavior, developing intellectual skills and competencies, beginning to prepare for a future occupation, marriage and family, and seeking some assurance of future economic independence (Peters, 1972).

In addition to cognitive and physical conflicts, our culture presents the adolescent with an inconsistency which contributes to the teen's role confusion. Our culture emphasizes independence and individuality, but poses few ways for the adolescent to express it, thus forcing the youth to remain dependent upon the adult

world (Peters, 1972). The United States, because of job limitations, lengthy school requirements, and social norms, keeps the adolescent dependent upon adults for a longer period of time than in any other country (Peters, 1972). In other cultures, this pubescent time period is much shorter, and most other nations have fewer social problems involving the adolescent age group (Cain, 1971).

ADULT ROLE CONFUSION

Another source of communication problems between adolescents and adults rises from a confusion as to the adult's role in cross-generational contexts. This confusion stems from a variety of parenting styles and changing family structures.

Adults, vis-a-vis adolescents, are unsure of their roles and just how they should perform them. As parents, they feel a need to assume responsibility for the welfare and actions of the adolescent, for whom they have had to care since the child's birth. In providing that care, the parent has learned to be the authority, the "wise counselor", and the one who sets limits. Many adults feel they are placed by social expectation and legal ramification into a position of responsibility and are obligated to adopt the role of being the exemplary model.

One factor contributing to the current confusion which adults feel regarding their roles stems from the changing nature of the American family. In less than one-hundred years the United States has moved from being an agrarian society to being an urban society. Increased urbanization and industrialization have directly affected adult-adolescent relationships by reducing emphasis on the nuclear family. Studies show that time spent in parent-child interactions within families has dramatically decreased in recent decades, thereby affecting the nature and quality of intergenerational communication (Glenn & Warner, 1981). The advent of increasingly liberal attitudes during the late 1960's and 1970's has also contributed to changes in the family. The resulting social changes during those years brought new

attitudes toward parenting. In addition, increased divorce rates have prompted a rise in the numbers of single parent homes. These parents, no longer able to find peer support within the family network, often become emotionally dependent upon their children, relying on them to 'fill in' for the absent spouse. This has altered many adult-adolescent relationships. While the authoritarian, or "boss" parent continues to dominate in some families, a variety of other parenting styles contributes to the confusion which many adults have concerning their roles when interacting with adolescents. Many of the problems encountered between adults and teens can be attributed to these different adult roles, each of which promotes a different kind of cross-generational relationship (Cain, 1971).

Dinkmeyer and McKay (1989) attribute much of the current confusion over adult and adolescent roles to changes in society at large and what they call the "democratic revolution". In recent decades people have demanded to be treated as equals. This cry for equal treatment has been voiced in labor, in ethnic and religious groups, and among women and the elderly. Families have been affected by this social change as well. Thus, the traditional autocratic adult-adolescent relationship has come under question (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1989).

ROLES IN CONFLICT

Much of the problem encountered between adults and adolescents may be fundamentally attributed to the fact that individuals are interacting through the facade of roles rather than as human beings. Confusion rises when each side holds expectations concerning these adopted roles. Children have become acculturated to adults taking certain positions and have grown to expect certain behaviors from them. Adults, in turn, feel pressures from society to react in certain ways when interacting with children. Each of these expectations promotes the continuation of role-defined interactions, thereby creating "self-fulfilling prophecies" (Wilmot, 1987).

Playing the part of "adult" around children does not allow the real person to emerge. By always acting from roles, interactions between youths and adults are reduced to a variety of well rehearsed scenes in which actors simply recite the same old lines. Playing parts, people fail to recognize one another as being unique individuals, and instead, react to one another as objects whose characteristics and expected behaviors arise from projected expectations based on past performances. In doing so, many adults fail to observe basic social amenities when interacting with children, amenities which they would normally honor in social exchanges with peers. As Peters (1972) wrote, "many parents and other adults often treat children without the politeness and respect they display in their usual social intercourse". The usual care and concern most people take in their interactions with other adults is suddenly discarded, just because one of the interactants is a young person. It becomes acceptable to interrupt, ignore, demand, order, or omit the use of polite speech such as 'please' or 'thank you', because the recipient of such interaction is a social role rather than a human being.

This difficulty in 'being human' becomes an even greater challenge for adults when sharing confidences with adolescents. Because they fear they will be "unmasked" and lose control, many adults find it difficult to self-disclose personal feelings and emotions, admit failure or lack of knowledge, ask for assistance or advice from adolescents, or in general, show their vulnerabilities (Peters, 1972). Yet, in interpersonal peer relationships, "no other communication behavior is so closely linked to close relationships as being open - engaging in self-disclosure" (Wilmot, 1987). Adults are surprised or disappointed when youths fail to share their true feelings, yet they themselves have modeled a reluctance to openly discuss personal matters with their children. Self-disclosure, after all, elicits further self-disclosure. Parents and other adults somehow expect children to instinctively know how to

interact on an interpersonal level, without having to be lead and guided through the learning process.

CONFLICT BETWEEN ROLES IN TRANSITION

The fact that the roles of both adolescent and adult are in a state of transition contributes to the problems between the two generations. Maturation is not a "state", but rather a "process" through which humans continue to evolve throughout life. Difficulties in the cross-generational relationship are exaggerated because of the interplay of the different transitional stages experienced by adult and adolescent as they each undergo this maturing process.

The adolescent is seeking individuation and attempting to discover an autonomous 'self', apart from the family, who, to this point in his life, has monopolized his identity. At the same time, s/he is seeking attachment and connectedness to other individuals, while attempting to form close, caring bonds with them. While the process of individuation is in sharp focus during adolescence, the matter of attachment is a focus task during early to middle adulthood (Meacham, 1987).

The adult, like the developing adolescent, is also going through a process of maturing. However, by focusing only on the adolescent and the transitional period which the teen is experiencing, the parent often fails to acknowledge his/her own life transition. The adult maintains the notion that if it weren't for the rebellious teenager, life would continue on as usual, without change. The inflexible parent, unwilling to admit that life itself is change, sees the adolescent as the 'guilty culprit' who has forced change upon family members. In so doing, the youth has created discord in everyone's life. The parent, in anticipation of losing the family unit to which s/he has grown accustomed, may resist this coming change. The adult's life transition requires his/her own preparation for independence and a new life focus

which does not revolve around children. In addition, adults must face advancing age and the emotional issues surrounding this issue.

The adolescent and the parent of the adolescent are undergoing major life transitions at the same time. Perhaps it is the interaction of adult and adolescent, each working their ways through their individual transitional phases, which increases the volatility of such relationships during this stage of life.

ADULT-ADOLESCENT POWER STRUGGLES

The issue of power plays a central role in the problems experienced in cross-generational relationships. DeVito (1986) defines power as "the ability or potential to control the behaviors of other(s)" (DeVito, 1986, p. 234). While power, according to Duke, is a primary component in all interpersonal conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985), it particularly contributes to problems in adult-adolescent relationships. The open expression of children's claiming their power becomes especially exaggerated during adolescence, since it is during this period of time that the youth is seeking independence as a human being. Parents and adults often have the conception that they "must maintain power" over the adolescent, and often wield power through a variety of tactics. While adolescents often misperceive the power adults have over them, they find ways to subvert adult efforts to control them. In seeking to control power in adult-adolescent relationships, both sides may be perpetuating the problems between the generations.

Adults wield power over adolescents through authority, reinforcement, information, money and controlling resources. An obvious example of an adult's use of power to control a youth is the authoritarian parent, using coercion or punishment. However, there are many other, less overt ways of exercising power. Using positive reinforcement or reward may be used as a control tactic. Power may also be increased by holding knowledge, information or expertise. Even self-disclosure may be used to

gain or receive power, in that it gives the listener "information power" (Galvin & Brommel, 1982). Another way parents maintain power over children is through financial dependence (Fremon, 1968) or through the control of other resources (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985), such as use of the family car.

Adolescents often misperceive the power which adults have over them. In the adult-child relationship, adults, having a larger "psychological size", command a power position through natural inference, which is established early in a child's life (Gordon, 1970). Janeway believes that children "attribute to adults mysterious, unfathomable powers", which lends a "magical aura" to the power wielded by adults. This idea is fostered in early childhood and perpetuated throughout a child's development into adolescence (Folger & Poole, 1984). Children see adults as being larger, stronger, more knowledgeable and more competent, a conception which adults promote by not showing their weaknesses to children (Gordon, 1970).

As adolescents begin to define their own identity and to express independence from the adult world, they begin to question adult power and to experiment with exerting their own power in a ploy for independence. The adolescent and parent clash in what the adult labels teenage "rebellion", while the youth, according to Folger & Poole (1984) is "testing and determining the role and limits of power". Hocker & Wilmot stated that "the productive exercise of one's personal power is crucial to the self-concept" (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985). It is thus a necessary part of the adolescent's bid for an independent identity. If the parent cannot channel this "testing of the water" into a winning situation, then the adolescent and adult may become entrenched in an unproductive, negative conflict spiral and end with no resolution.

Adolescents develop sources of power that subvert the power base of adults. These may manifest as passive-aggressive tactics of exerting power. Examples of such tactics include the forgetting of appointments, promises or agreements; saying unkind things and apologizing afterwards; acting out nonverbally, then denying anything is

wrong; getting confused, tearful, sarcastic or helpless when certain topics are introduced; getting sick after having promised to do something; or scheduling two things at once (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985). The weaker person in a power imbalance has some leverage over the stronger by exercising the option to withdraw support of the other (Folger & Poole, 1984). The person who feels powerless in an interaction may simply give up, become aggressive, or act out violently (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985). Developing severely dysfunctional behavior is another way to exercise power.

By exerting authoritarian power over adolescents, adults may actually be triggering rebellious behavior in the youth. "Power actually empowers its own victims, creates its own opposition, fosters its own destruction" (Gordon, 1970). If an adult really wants to influence an adolescent, then the open, conflictual power play is actually counterproductive. Power and influence, mistakenly thought of as synonyms by many, are very different matters, according to Gordon (1970). While "influence" includes persuading, convincing, educating or motivating, "power" compels or attempts to force. "Parents lose influence by using power and will have more influence on their children by giving up their power or refusing to use it" (Gordon, 1970). The adolescent does not so much rebel against the parent as he rebels against the parent's use of power.

Left unresolved, such power conflicts continue to surface again and again, oftentimes masked as disagreements over apparently inconsequential issues which escalate quickly into full blown arguments (Folger & Poole, 1984). The real issue at hand is the adolescent's need to find independence and the adult's fear of losing control over the "child". All dyadic communication, particularly in cross-generational contexts, deals with the balancing of these opposites of autonomy and interdependence, or separateness and connectedness. For the adolescent, this struggle is an on-going conflict between "the growing child becoming an individual and being loyal to the needs of the family" (Wilmot, 1987).

When power imbalances exist, both the adolescent and the adult adopt roles which oppose one another rather than work together in cooperation toward a mutual agreement. The adult's roles may include: the "commander in chief", the "moralist", the "know it all", the "judge", the "critic", the "psychologist", or the "consoler" (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1973). In response to these adult roles, the teen becomes defensive and feels resentful and misunderstood. In turn, the adolescent adopts such roles as "attention getter", "debater", "rebel", "confrontation avoider" or "revenge seeker". Such roles may eventually manifest into deviant behaviors like stealing or vandalism (Peters, 1972).

COMMUNICATION: A MEANS TO BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

Fundamental to managing problems between adults and adolescents, whether rising from role conflicts or power struggles, is the establishing of a supportive versus a defensive environment. Gibb set the groundwork for studies concerning this subject by designating components of these terms. What Gibb (1965) has labelled "participative management", leads to a supportive climate and extends to use in families as well as in organizations. Establishing a climate of trust and acceptance depends upon fundamental trust and respect for self and others. Trust is also promoted by focusing on problems versus focusing on individuals. A supportive environment involves the free and spontaneous flow of information between all participants as well as the expression of both positive and negative feelings. The participative approach emphasizes problem-solving and assessment of needs, with all participants collaborating to resolve problems. Finally, Gibb states that control in a truly supportive environment emanates from the group as a whole rather than being mandated by only one group member. (Gibb, 1965).

The specific behaviors identified by Gibb which promote supportive communication include: 1) genuine information seeking and giving, 2) spontaneous problem solving, 3) empathic understanding, and 4) equality. These categories were used as scoring criteria for a study reported by Alexander (1973) which analyzed defensive and supportive communication in families. The study concluded that better adjusted families used more supportive communication than families experiencing adult-adolescent problems.

Dinkmeyer and McKay (1989) feel that two basic requisites to managing any adult-adolescent problem are "respect" and "equality". Respecting teens as "persons having equal human worth and dignity" is essential to achieving positive cross-generational relationships (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1969). Respect grows when each side allows the other the freedom to grow independently as individuals. Respect, according to Missildine, between adolescents and adults, grows from a constantly moving balance between "setting limits" and "giving responsibilities" (Peters, 1972). In addition, Fremon (1968) emphasizes the need for physical proximity, i.e. participants must be present, in order to interact.

Interpersonal communication skills and strategies can be used to manage role conflicts and power struggles between adolescents and adults. Problems rising from role conflicts between the generations may be reduced by increasing self-disclosure, employing active listening skills, and paying attention to message wording. Problems resulting from adult-adolescent power struggles may be diminished with skills involving conflict management, problem-solving, and decision-making.

MANAGING ADULT-ADOLESCENT ROLE CONFLICTS

Initially, the first step adults might make toward managing role conflicts in adult-adolescent relationships is to increase their own self-awareness and self-acceptance. This includes understanding individual parenting style(s) and/or personal expressions

of adult roles. Gibb (1965) states that accepting oneself is an essential factor in promoting a climate of trust and acceptance. Gibb's research was based on the Rogerian model which hypothesized that "genuineness", "unconditional positive regard" and "empathy" were needed to promote personal growth and change (Winer & Majors, 1981). Dinkmeyer and McKay (1989) contend that adults must focus on changing themselves rather than changing the adolescents with whom they interact. Acceptance of oneself leads to acceptance of others and increased openness with information exchange. These behaviors, then, lead to a climate of trust and support.

In addition to self-awareness, adults need to understand the cognitive and developmental limitations of adolescents in general, as well as the abilities and limitations of the particular adolescent with whom they interact. Since such cognitive or developmental limitations may affect an adolescent's communicative abilities, adults must adjust expectations accordingly.

Another essential skill needed to manage role conflicts between adolescents and adults is flexibility. Alexander (1973) discovered that "normal" families responded to family stress with "adaptation", while "abnormals" responded with "disintegration". In order to respond to the varying and continually changing abilities of the growing adolescent, adults, especially, must learn to become flexible in knowing when to respond with which specific style. There may be times when teens need established and enforced limits, at times more gentle nudging, and yet other times when they need the supportive sanction to act on their own as adults.

One very important communication strategy for managing adult-adolescent problems is self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is defined by DeVito as "a type of communication in which information about the self that is normally kept hidden is communicated to another person" (DeVito, 1986, p. 277). Such information must be new knowledge in order to be self-disclosure. In trying to hold onto expected roles, adults often fail to share themselves as human beings with children. Making mistakes,

failing, or admitting to not knowing answers to questions around adolescents is not easy for many adults. Beginning to allow oneself to appear human by disclosing such perceived "shortcomings" is needed in improving adult-adolescent relationships (Fremon, 1968). By renouncing one's own humanness and acting solely from an assumed *role*, an adult is ultimately denying him/herself the rewards of satisfying interpersonal relationships.

Individuals learn self-disclosure by experiencing relationships in which it is used (Glenn & Warner, 1982). It cannot be assumed that adolescents will share hidden information about themselves if the adults around them do not do so. The adult, therefore, must become the leader, the guide, or the teacher in helping the teen learn this essential interpersonal skill. Self-disclosure promotes the same in others, so adults need to take the initiative in order to model this behavior for the adolescent.

"Active listening" is a fundamental communication skill which can be used in improving adult-adolescent relationships. DeVito defines active listening as "a process of sending back to the speaker what you as a listener think the speaker meant - both in terms of content and in terms of feelings" (DeVito, 1986, p. 3). This skill involves verbal as well as nonverbal signals, and is a way for the listener to indicate to the speaker that the message content and speaker's feelings were understood. Active listening includes such verbal techniques as: using probing questions, offering encouragement, rephrasing and clarifying statements, and offering feedback. Nonverbal messages of support may be conveyed through the use of facial expression, eye contact, gestures and posture.

Active listening not only facilitates good relationships, it also serves to convey a message to the adolescent that s/he has worth, thereby helping to promote positive self-esteem and self-confidence in the youth (Fremon, 1968). Research supports the connection between communication skills and the development of self-esteem in adolescents (Matteson, 1974 ; deTurk, M.A. & Miller, G.R. ,1986) Increasing the

adolescent's self-esteem should, in turn, help to promote better relationships with adults, since, as Gibbs suggested, self-acceptance is fundamental to building supportive climates.

Showing the pretense of listening, according to Peters (1972), can actually be damaging to the adult-adolescent relationship. While it is easy to suggest that adults listen with genuine interest all the time, the complexity of most people's lives, as well as the diversity of individual interests, often prevents this from happening. Rather than adopting a facade of listening, an adult would be more successful to honestly express that the present time is not good and establish another time for conversation when s/he can devote focused attention to the adolescent. Some families set aside a regular time daily for such discussion. While adults may find it difficult to do, it is crucial that they refrain from lecturing, offering advice or making judgements when listening to a teenager. Until adolescents feel satisfied that their feelings and ideas have been heard, they will not be receptive to an adult's opinions.

Establishing a forum for "equal time" is a technique used in parent-child mediation programs (Zetzel, 1984) and may assist in managing adult-adolescent problems. Although a neutral third party is used in an actual mediation, the general concept is applicable to self-management in adult-adolescent relationships. During a mediation, each member of the family is given time to speak. One of the mediator's roles is to use active listening skills as a way to relay to the family member that his/her message was received. Restating messages also serves in this setting to convey a paraphrased statement of the individual's feelings and message content to other family members, thereby reinforcing the value of each person's thoughts and feelings.

Focused listening may also offer clues as to underlying concerns which the teen may be reluctant to bring up on his/her own. Such unspoken worries can impede interpersonal interaction by overshadowing other attempts to resolve cross-

generational conflicts. Since the adolescent is often hesitant to assertively disclose personal issues, a simple probing question from the adult may open the door for a discussion which might otherwise go unaddressed (Fremon, 1968).

The wording of messages is another important skill in managing role conflicts between adults and adolescents. The messages themselves may either promote positive or negative interaction. Glenn and Warner (1982) stress the importance of wording in a message: "young people may reject us not for being active parents, but because the *way* we speak to them puts them off".

Glenn and Warner (1982) call those trite messages which adults use as stock answers to almost any situation, "adultisms". They believe that adults use such expressions because of unconscious expectations that young people should view life from the same perspectives and with the same values as they do. "To expect the children to have an adult perspective leads to feelings of powerlessness and inferiority as they feel they do not measure up to these adult perceptions and expectations" (Glenn & Warner, 1982). Examples of "adultisms" include: "How many times do I have to tell you...?", "Someday you'll thank me for this...", and "I'm doing this for your own good...". (Glenn & Warner, 1982).

The ways messages are worded can have deep and profound affects on an adolescent's sense of personal ability and self-worth. A study by Harris and Howard (1984) offers support to the claim that parental criticism affects adolescents' self-concept. Such phrases as, "Why can't you ever...?" may lead teens to believe "they never do anything right". Telling adolescents they're "bad kids" conveys a message of having little worth. By wording the message in another way ("What you have done is wrong, and I am surprised because you are such a good person") the corrective emphasis is placed on the *behavior* and not on the intrinsic worth of the individual. (Glenn & Warner, 1982).

Peters (1972) cites another example of the importance of message wording. He believes that asking "why" questions in adult-youth interactions delivers a message of adult displeasure toward the adolescent. If the answer offered by the teen is then associated with a lecture, s/he will likely feel evaluated. In addition, youths may feel that their behavior is the criterion by which adults offer their approval and acceptance, or disproval and rejection.

It is commonly accepted that the ownership of a sentence helps to reduce defensiveness (Winer & Majors, 1981). Many parenting and communication skills books and programs advocate the use of "I-You" message structures. A study conducted by Winer and Majors (1981) supported the hypothesis that literal "I-You" statements are seen as more supportive than deceptive "I-You" statements. Statements which establish the listener as the subject of the statement may promote a defensive climate if the receiver feels attacked, judged or accused. The difference between: "you are being a pest" and "I am feeling tired and irritable from my long day at work" is obvious. Simply turning around the wording in the second message places the focus on the speaker and may likely eliminate a defensive reaction from the receiver. Using the first message might easily prompt open conflict or withdrawal by the receiver who, in turn, might feel rejected and inadequate. (Gordon, 1970).

Since human beings learn to talk as a natural part of growing from infancy into childhood, there is an assumption that communication is simply something we know how to do as a result of growing older. However, effective communication skills are not inherent to the aging process. Such skills are learned through modeling by example as we grow. If the models we encounter are ineffective, then those are the skills which we learn. In such cases, the only way to change old patterns is through intentional learning and practice. Adolescents and children know only that which has been their experience. If they have not encountered productive communication,

then they will not be able to practice it. It is the responsibility of adults to lead the way in helping young people improve their interpersonal skills.

MANAGING ADULT-ADOLESCENT POWER STRUGGLES

Power struggles between adolescents and adults may be reduced through the use of conflict management, problem-solving, and decision-making skills. As previously mentioned, establishing a supportive environment will help in managing both role conflicts and power struggles. Employing the positive communication skills of active listening, awareness of message wording and allowing self-disclosure will also contribute to managing power struggles.

There is a fallacy, according to Hocker and Wilmot (1985), in the notion that power is "owned" by the individual and that it is in finite supply, . They believe that "all power in interpersonal relations is a property of the social relationship rather than a quality of the individual outside of the relationship" (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985). They go on to explain that the power one person has over another equals the amount of dependence the second has over the first. Any conflict which seeks to place power totally on one side or the other, will always be a losing battle. Power balancing is a matter of empowering each person in conflict, resulting in a "win-win" outcome. "Productive power balancing can occur by an expansion of individual and relational power rather than by a struggle over winning a bigger part of finite power" (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985).

Dinkmeyer and McKay (1989) suggest that the best way for an adult to deal with an adolescent in a power struggle is to disengage from the controversy. Without an opponent, there cannot be a fight. When adults continue to battle against a teen in a power conflict, rebellious behavior may actually be promoted by giving the adolescent something against which to rebel. Instead, Dinkmeyer and McKay (1989) suggest that

adults let teens experience the natural consequences of their behavior. Instead of being an authority figure and decision-maker, adults can elicit cooperation from adolescents by "enlisting their help, opinions, and suggestions".

Learning productive conflict management skills can help to reduce adult-adolescent problems. In general, people, assume that "harmony is normal and conflict is abnormal". As a result, many people never learn how to deal with conflict in a productive way, opting instead to simply avoid it (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985). This discomfort with conflict often stems from personal memories of unresolved, explosive experiences. As Folger and Poole (1984) stated, "People shy away from conflict because all too often they see only the negative results of poorly managed conflict". Conflict is not simply a matter of miscommunication. Rather, each person has unique needs or goals which influence and contribute to conflict. Summarized by Frost & Wilmot, "conflict is the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving those goals" (Folger & Poole, 1984). Learning how to deal with such differences is important to managing interpersonal problems. Folger and Poole (1984) identify five basic styles of interacting during conflict. These styles involve various degrees of two components: assertiveness (the degree to which one acts to satisfy one's own concerns) and cooperativeness (the degree to which one strives to satisfy the other's concerns). These conflict styles include: competitive, accommodative, avoidance, collaborative, and compromising approaches. Although no one style is considered superior in all situations, learning collaborative skills can ultimately lead to resolution of problems with mutual satisfaction.

Learning to collaborate during conflicts and mutually work toward agreement can focus everyone's attention on the substance of the problem and move focus away from power issues of "win-lose". One collaborative model for managing conflict, called "creative integration", is described by Filley (1975) and by Deetz & Stevenson

(1986). This approach to conflict management is a means of uncovering the fundamental commonalties which lie underneath apparent disagreements among participants. Many conflicts continue unresolved because interactants focus on the "preferred means of attainment" rather than on the ultimate end results. Creative integration seeks to reach resolution through the following four steps. First, each participant identifies his/her own goals. Next, everyone's goals are combined. The third step involves finding activities and resources that will allow the listed goals to be accomplished. Finally, conflict participants select and implement a course of action.

Adolescents, while seeking increased independence, need at the same time to develop an increased sense of responsibility. Dinkmeyer and McKay (1989) maintain that independence and responsibility "go hand in hand". One of the primary functions an adult can perform for an adolescent is to assist him/her in learning to take responsibility. Learning responsibility requires the skills of problem-solving and decision-making. Adults can offer teens guidance in learning such skills, and in doing so, can promote better adult-adolescent relationships.

If adults always give directions or protect teens from the pain of the world, they are only promoting adolescent dependence upon the adult world. By failing to teach young people skills with which to cope alone in the world, the adult is fostering helplessness. This could eventually lead the youth to feeling overwhelmed and powerless. It is important that the adolescent internalizes a process for independently facing and solving future problems.

One approach to problem-solving or decision-making is a method created by Glenn and Warner (1982) which they call "EIAG". The letters stand for steps in the process: Experience, Identify, Analyze and Generalize. First, an <u>experience</u> from the teen's life is chosen. Then, through a series of questions, the adult helps the youth <u>identify</u> significant elements or outcomes of the event for himself. Next, again being led by questions from the adult, the adolescent <u>analyzes</u> why those aspects of the event

were important. The reason for this, according to Glenn and Warner (1982), is the attribution of meaning. Unless we attribute meaning to our experiences, we cannot learn from them. Finally, the youth is helped in generalizing from the specific experience in order to draw conclusions which s/he might be able to apply to future situations. In the words of Glenn and Warner:

> "The EIAG method is based on the idea that the parent takes the lead as a good listener, and in turn, the child learns to do the same. The parent tries to understand from the child's point of view and may or may not present his own view. He is patient and helpful in allowing the child time and sufficient information to figure out what happened, why it happened and how to use or avoid the situation in the future. The parent allows the child to solve the problem or to attach clear meaning to the event so that the child has a guide to work from in the future." (Glenn & Warner, 1982, p. 30)

Another useful skill-building model for learning decision-making is drawn from Glasser's (1975) "reality therapy" approach. This technique involves a method of using questions to guide a person through a process of personally realizing the effects of one's own actions upon others. Following the reality therapy model, a youth would first identify the event or behavior, acknowledging his/her own actions. Next, guided by questions, the teen makes a judgement as to the value of his/her actions. Then the adolescent is helped in making a plan for alternatives to change the behavior in the future. Finally, the young person makes a commitment to trying the plan s/he has devised and receives supportive reinforcement by the adult "guide".

The greatest value of both these techniques is that they promote personal *experiencing* of the decision-making process. With adult guidance, an adolescent learns to analyze the situation, make decisions, and take responsibility for his/her own actions. Both these techniques may be effective ways to provide teens with

invaluable coping skills in preparation for adulthood. Through the use of such methods, the youth also learns productive communication skills, which may then help to promote better adult-adolescent relationships.

Learning such communication strategies and skills is not easy, however. It requires commitment, perseverance, and practice. The importance of improving communication skills is rapidly being acknowledged as fundamental to improving adult-adolescent relationships. A variety of intervention programs are beginning to emerge which address communication within the family. Programs addressing needs in the areas of juvenile justice and substance abuse treatment and prevention are recognizing the importance of addressing dysfunctional communication and helping to build positive skills. Many of these programs support the model presented by Satir (1975) which adheres to the idea that communication is the primary tool in working with dysfunctioning families. "First Offender" Programs within the Juvenile Justice System teach communication skills and offer families an opportunity to practice and improve their relationships. Parent-child mediation programs and mediation in the schools programs are gaining popularity. Such models focus on building communication and problem-solving skills as a basis for improving cross-generational relationships. Substance abuse treatment centers and delinquency prevention programs also recognize the need for improving family relationships through teaching better communication skills. Thus, it is evident that problems between adults and adolescents can and are being effectively managed through learning communication strategies and skills.

SUMMARY

Two primary factors contributing to the difficulties in the adult-adolescent relationship include role conflicts and power struggles between the two generations. Establishing a supportive environment is fundamental to improving relationships between adults and teens. Another essential element to improving interaction between the generations is increasing self-awareness and self-acceptance. It is important that both adults and adolescents gain an understanding of the sources of confusion over individual roles, as well as gaining awareness about the developmental life stages through which humans progress as they mature. Such awareness will assist in increasing our understanding of the different factors which influence individual behaviors and thus, interactions between adults and adolescents. Problems rising from role conflicts between the generations may be reduced by practicing self-disclosure, employing active listening skills, and paying attention to message wording. Problems resulting from adult-adolescent power struggles may be diminished through the use of conflict management skills, problem-solving skills, and decision-making skills. Communication strategies and skills can assist in managing problems rising from adult-adolescent interaction and in this way, can help build better, more satisfying relationships between the generations.

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